

The USMC Mentorship Program as a Deterrent to Risky Behavior

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PREFACE

During a recent six-month deployment to Iraq as a UH-1N aircraft commander, this author began to realize that many of the young, aggressive crew chiefs upon whom he relied were engaging in risky off-duty behavior, particularly with respect to their motorcycles. He often overheard them discussing how fast they rode on the highways or how to ride an extended wheelie. It was clear that the crew chiefs lived to shed the Marine culture on the weekends, to exercise their free will, and to seek thrills and freedom on their motorcycles was clear.

No amount of counseling about their aggressive riding habits dissuaded them. None of the multiple appeals to either common sense or financial consequences seemed to reach them. Even the possibility of writing the headline "Marine survives Iraq to die in California motorcycle accident" failed to motivate change. No amount of mentoring or genuine concern from this author dissuaded his crew chiefs from "pushing the envelope" on their beloved bikes.

Since returning to California in May 2005, this author has learned that every one of his motorcycle-riding crew chiefs has experienced a mishap on his bike. However, each time they had managed to walk away. Three months ago a dreaded phone call confirmed that one of them had not walked away. The crew chief died instantly when, after a long night of partying in Los

Angeles, he impacted a concrete barrier at a high rate of speed. After experiencing the sorrow that accompanies a senseless loss of life, emotions turned from self-examination to anger.

INTRODUCTION

The United States Marine Corps suffered 291 off-duty mishaps from 2000-2005.¹ Further, there have been eleven so far for fiscal year 2006.² The graph below shows that from 2002 to 2004 a significant number of these traffic deaths occurred during off-duty periods (nights and weekends) and that speed, alcohol, and the failure to use seat belts played a significant role³. Lieutenant Colonel Michael Grady of the Naval Safety Center made the Marine Corps' stance clear when he stated "...something must be done to instill in our Marines the need to exercise the same knack for self-preservation while on leave and liberty that they have perfected while on duty."⁴ The Marine Corps has responded with many new programs, including the Mentor Program. The collective hope is to save lives through "genuine concern".⁵ Personal experience makes this author a skeptic.

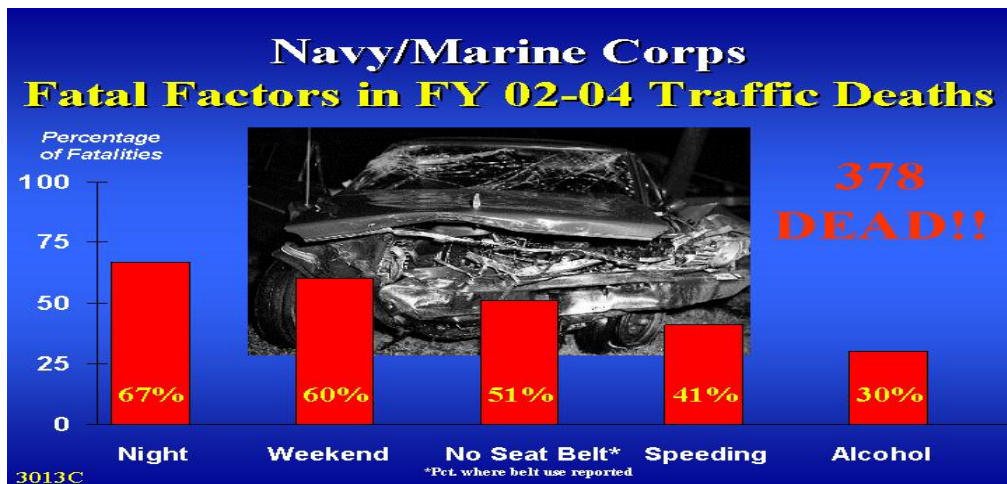
¹Michael W. Grady, "Marines are Dying!", Marine Corps Gazette, February 2006, 46.

²MARADMIN 551/05

³<http://safetycenter.navy.mil/statistics/images/fatalfactors.jpg>

⁴Michael W. Grady, "Marines are Dying!", Marine Corps Gazette, February 2006, 46.

⁵Draft ALMAR: "Marine Corps Mentoring Program", 2.



In fact, despite the Marine Corps' new Mentor Program (MCMP), young Marines will continue to die in off-duty accidents as a result of the high-risk demographic from which the Marine Corps recruits and the Marine Corps will have few viable alternatives.

THE USMC MENTOR PROGRAM

The Marine Corps Mentor Program is a new effort to influence the off-duty behavior of the young Marine. The MCMP seeks to "exploit our strengthened camaraderie"⁶ and to stress the important influence a leader has over his subordinates, both in combat and at home. One of the program's stated goals is to "foster and strengthen relationships of accountability and responsibility ... and adherence to our core values 24 hours a day, 7 days a week."⁷ The MCMP states that one of its tenets is for a Marine's mentor to show genuine concern and take personal responsibility for the failures of the mentee. Further, the

⁶ Draft ALMAR: "Marine Corps Mentoring Program", 2.

⁷ Draft ALMAR: "Marine Corps Mentoring Program", 2.

program expects the individual mentor to instill the 24/7 culture in his/her mentee. The program does not address whether the thrill-seeking, independent-minded Marine who was recruited to be a strategic corporal will see this program as imposing (not instilling) a 24/7 culture⁸. It is safe to assume that this Marine is the same one who drives his motorcycle or personal car at excessive speeds on the weekend or, worse, mixes drinking and driving.

The MCMP order states "...there is evidence that Marines don't view themselves as Marines 24/7."⁹ Marines are making decisions that lead to their deaths by not using the judgment and decision-making skills that they have been instilled with. The tentative order which details the MCMP states that "everything a Marine does, on duty, leave or liberty affects the readiness of the team."¹⁰ Clearly, an unstated goal is to impress upon Marines the need to apply the same sound decision-making they use in combat to their liberty time.

Although many lives will be affected positively through the Mentor Program, as an institution, the Marine Corps fails to comprehend the risk-seeking culture of the Marine that causes him/her to make life-ending or altering decisions while on liberty. The Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps, General

⁸ Draft ALMAR: "Marine Corps Mentoring Program", 2.

⁹ Draft ALMAR: "Marine Corps Mentoring Program", Encl. 1, pg. 7

¹⁰ Draft ALMAR: "Marine Corps Mentoring Program", 3.

Robert Magnus, in discussing the extent of off-duty fatalities, states "it is time to execute existing policy and implement established controls. This is especially true with motorcycles."¹¹ Instead of executing existing policy, The Marine Corps added another control by creating the Mentor Program.

HIGH RISK DEMOGRAPHIC

Risky behavior and poor judgment are inherent in today's young men and women. Analysis of National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) statistics shows that in fatal vehicle crashes in 2004, the highest percentage of drivers with blood alcohol content (BAC) levels of .08 or higher were among drivers age 21-24 (32%), followed by 25-34 year olds (27%).¹²

Although the percentage of alcohol-related mishaps is roughly equal in both the civilian and military sector, high-risk character traits seem to be inherent in the young men and women the Marine Corps recruits. The Marine Corps recruits young, adventurous, and aggressive men and women through ads on NASCAR racecars and in high-profile television advertisements. For example, one recruiting commercial shows a young man, alone, clothed in jeans and a T-shirt, staring at a sheer rock face while combat images flash rapidly. He begins a solo climb to the top as images of the flag-raising on Mount Suribachi, AH-1W

¹¹ MARADMIN 551/05

¹² <http://www-nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov>

Cobra attack helicopters, and Marines in combat continue to flash. As he reaches the top, he is helped by the likeness of another Marine, clearly showing the bond that exists between all Marines, past or present. His transformation is complete and he is now a Marine. This advertisement appeals to the willful, independent-minded, thrill-seeker with something to prove.

The Marine Corps takes this young man or woman, harnesses his/her desire for personal achievement, and produces the strategic corporal. This young Marine quickly learns to follow and then lead. Subsequently he/she is placed in a situation on the battlefield where his/her decisions and actions potentially carry strategic weight. The Marine Corps is highly successful at instilling in a young Marine the ethos that is required to be successful in this combat scenario. Yet, the fact that these same traits motivate young Marines to seek other forms of adrenaline rush outside the gates of the base is an area that is overlooked.

OPTIONS

The author's mentoring by showing genuine concern and taking personal responsibility failed to prevent his crew chief from dying. The question is how can the MCMP close the culture gap that exists within the aggressive, thrill-seeking, independent-minded Marine who refuses to be instilled with a 24/7 Marine culture. If the ultimate intent of the program is to

keep Marines alive, making positive contributions to the success of the unit, and thinking they are always on duty, then it may be necessary for mentors to impose the 24/7 Marine culture. To impose a 24/7 culture would require senior leaders to further restrict the freedoms of young Marines by taking away the instruments (e.g. motorcycles) that lead them to make poor decisions.

Another option is to hold the mentor accountable somehow. The MCMP order states "(a) leader's mentoring skills...should be considered when assigning pro/con marks or completing fitness report evaluations".¹³ The order should be strengthened here and clearly state that in order to be considered eligible for promotion or command at a higher level, a mentor must be able to show quantifiable evidence that his mentoring kept his/her Marines safe and positively contributing to the unit. This is easier said than done. In fact, a mentor would be forced to impose the 24/7 culture and restrict Marine's risky, off-duty activities.

RETAINING FREE WILL

Ultimately, the Marine Corps' leaders can not stamp out the character traits that make a strategic corporal successful on today's non-linear battlefield. Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Shusko, director of the MCMP, states that attempting to

¹³Draft ALMAR: "Marine Corps Mentoring Program", 3.

"quantitatively measure the success or failure of the MCMP will cause many leaders to focus on their career".¹⁴ A leader's focus on his career will lead him/her to lose that genuine concern necessary to mentor a Marine. Instead, the Marine Corps must accept that young Marines are aggressive and will engage in risky off-duty behavior.

CONCLUSION

It may not be possible to eliminate off-duty mishaps, but genuine concern and the MCMP will "save a majority of our Marines."¹⁵ This should be the ultimate goal: continue to mentor young Marines (thru the MCMP) and attempt to instill accountability and responsibility. However, ultimately the Marine Corps will be forced to accept the off-duty risky, thrill seeking behavior of the Marines who were recruited to be victorious on the nation's battlefields.

WORD COUNT: 1500

¹⁴ Interview with author, 15 December 2005.

¹⁵ Interview with author, 15 December 2005.

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